

THE PUBLIC HEALTH THREATS AND EMERGENCIES ACT OF 2000 (S. 2731)
SENATORS BILL FRIST, M.D. AND EDWARD KENNEDY

SUMMARY

Public Health Threats: An Overview

Most Americans live longer, healthier lives today than ever before. However, the nation also faces grave new threats that, if unmet, will imperil the extraordinary medical progress made in recent decades. These emerging threats include new or resurgent infectious diseases, dangerous microbes resistant to antibiotics, and bioterrorist attacks. The Public Health Threats and Emergencies Act of 2000 strengthens the nation's capacity to detect and respond to these serious public health threats by:

- Improving the capacity of national, state, and local public health agencies to detect and respond effectively to infectious disease outbreaks and other public health emergencies;
- Enhancing the nation's ability to detect and control the spread of disease-causing microbes that are resistant to antibiotics; and
- Upgrading the nation's preparedness for the public health and medical consequences of bioterrorist attacks.

Improving the Capacity of Public Health Agencies to Combat Disease Emergencies

The nation today faces grave new health threats that we are poorly prepared to fight. Drug resistant diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis continue to claim millions of lives across the world and will pose an increasing danger to this country in years to come. The recent outbreak of West Nile Fever in the Northeast is an ominous warning of emerging infectious diseases. New plagues like Ebola virus and others yet unknown to science could easily invade our shores.

To respond effectively to these growing threats, we must strengthen the capacity of our public health agencies to detect, diagnose, and contain infectious disease outbreaks. Many of these agencies lack the basic computer equipment to share data electronically on disease outbreaks and cannot perform simple lab tests to diagnose infections. Most agencies don't have a complete assessment of their current capacities and needs. To meet these challenges, the Frist-Kennedy bill establishes grant programs to allow state and local public health agencies to:

- Assess their current capacities and identify their areas of greatest need.
- Upgrade the ability of public health labs to identify disease-causing microbes.
- Improve and expand electronic communication networks.
- Develop plans to respond to public health emergencies.
- Train public health personnel.

Revitalizing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The mission of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is to prevent and control

disease, injury, and disability. However, most of CDC's laboratory facilities are in a state of disrepair and require immediate modernization. This raises concerns that these facilities will be severely outmatched by undiscovered biological threats that we will encounter in the future. To better defend against and combat the public health threats of the twenty-first century, this bill provides funding to CDC for construction and renovation of facilities.

Combating Antimicrobial Resistance

The widespread use of antibiotics beginning in the 1940's provided – for the first time in history – effective treatments for infectious diseases. These miracle drugs have saved countless lives, but today they are increasingly prescribed or used inappropriately. Antibiotics that once had the power to cure dangerous infections are now often useless, because microbes have become resistant to all but the newest and most expensive drugs -- and some “superbugs” are impervious to any weapons in the medical arsenal.

Resistance to antibiotics takes a heavy toll on patients across the nation. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 14,000 Americans per year, or one American every 38 minutes, die from drug-resistant infections. The financial burden of antibiotic resistance is also staggering. WHO estimates that the United States spends \$10 billion a year treating antibiotic-resistant infections – and this burden will grow heavier as more and more microbes become resistant. To meet the grave and growing problem of antimicrobial resistance, the Frist-Kennedy bill:

- Directs HHS to conduct a nationwide campaign to educate patients and doctors about the appropriate use of antibiotics;
- Authorizes HHS initiatives to monitor and contain the spread of resistant microbes;
- Authorizes grants for public health agencies to combat antimicrobial resistance;
- Establishes demonstration grants for hospitals and clinics to promote the judicious use of antibiotics and to control the spread of resistant infections.

Protecting the Public Health Against Bioterrorist Attacks

The Office of Emergency Preparedness estimates that 40 million Americans could die if a terrorist released smallpox into the population. Anthrax could kill 10 million. We must be prepared to resist these threats as vigorously as we would fight an invading army. To enhance the ability of the nation's public health agencies to respond to acts of bioterrorism against the civilian population, the Frist-Kennedy legislation:

- Establishes grants to train health care professional in recognizing and treating illnesses caused by such attacks;
- Improves coordination among federal agencies to develop public health countermeasures against bioterrorism, such as stockpiles of necessary drugs; and
- Reauthorizes an existing provision that allows the Secretary of HHS to protect the public health in the event of a bioterrorist attack or other disease emergency.

